

June 8, 2001

The Honorable David Walker
Comptroller General of the United States
U.S. General Accounting Office
441 G Street NW
Washington D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Walker:

Two years ago this week, three young boys were killed by a hazardous liquid pipeline explosion in Bellingham, Washington. In the last decade, there were 2,241 major pipeline accidents that killed 226 people and caused more than \$700 million of damage to property and the environment. We remain extremely concerned about pipeline safety and the Department of Transportation Office of Pipeline Safety's oversight of our Nation's 2.2 million miles of pipelines. We write to request a General Accounting Office review of the Office of Pipeline Safety's progress in addressing outstanding statutory requirements and National Transportation Safety Board recommendations.

In May 2000, the General Accounting Office (GAO) issued a report, Pipeline Safety: The Office of Pipeline Safety Is Changing How It Oversees the Pipeline Industry (GAO/RCED-00-128), reviewing the performance of the Office of Pipeline Safety (OPS) in regulating pipeline safety. As part of your review, you examined OPS's responsiveness to recommendations from the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) and to statutory requirements designed to improve pipeline safety. You generously characterized the agency's responsiveness as "mixed." We believe "poor" would be a more accurate grade.

In your report, you found that the Office of Pipeline Safety failed to implement 22 existing statutory directives, including 12 requirements that are a decade or more old. You also found that OPS has the lowest rate of any transportation agency of compliance with NTSB recommendations. For instance, in 1987, as a result of investigations into three pipelines safety accidents, the NTSB recommended that the Department of Transportation (DOT) require operators to periodically inspect their pipelines to identify corrosion, mechanical damage, or other time-dependent defects that may prohibit their safe operation. In 1992, Congress passed legislation that directed DOT to adopt regulations by 1995 requiring inspections. Now 14 years since the first NTSB recommendation and nine years since the statutory mandate, OPS has not issued even a proposed regulation to impose pipeline inspection requirements on natural gas transmission pipelines. When it comes to the public's safety, these delays are unacceptable, and simply inexcusable.

Within the last year, and partly as an outgrowth of the tragedy in Bellingham, OPS has made some progress on implementing statutory requirements and complying with NTSB recommendations. We request that GAO review OPS's progress in addressing the outstanding statutory requirements and NTSB recommendations since you issued your May 2000 report. We

would appreciate correspondence from you on the results of your survey within 30 days from the date of this letter.

If you have any questions regarding this request, please contact either of us or David Heymsfeld, Committee Democratic Staff Director, at 225-4472.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Rick Larsen
Oberstar
Member of Congress
Democratic Member

James L.

Ranking

cc: The Honorable Norman Y. Mineta
Secretary
U.S. Department of Transportation
400 Seventh Street, S.E.
Washington, D.C. 20590